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Traffic plan for RNC keeps most roads open

St. Paul police say much of downtown will be unaffected by the Xcel Energy Center security perimeter. Details about that zone will be announced in mid-August.

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West Seventh Street is pictured looking toward Xcel Energy Center. During the GOP convention, West Seventh will be restricted between the arena and Chestnut Street. (Richard Marshall, Pioneer Press)

Much of downtown St. Paul will be open to traffic during the 2008 Republican National Convention, according to a plan announced Wednesday by the St. Paul Police Department.

Lowertown, all bridges coming into downtown and both major interstate highways will be free of

restrictions during the event, which runs Sept. 1-4 at the Xcel Energy Center. However, police are still finalizing plans for a several-city-block area surrounding the venue, and cars are likely to be prohibited on some streets at times during the convention, where Arizona Sen. John McCain is to be named the Republican Party's presidential nominee.

Assistant Police Chief Matt Bostrom, who heads security planning for the event, said he doesn't foresee any business being forced to close during the convention. Everything from the Dorothy Day homeless shelter to major hospitals to small businesses are likely to remain open.

"The sidewalks will be open and you'll be able to walk into a business," Bostrom said.

Passage close to the Xcel is likely to be restricted to convention-goers, however. Bostrom said that perimeter is still being finalized.

"We want to get as close to the skin of the building as we can without absorbing some of the streets," he said.

Vehicle restrictions, including whether Metro Transit buses will need to be rerouted, will be announced sometime around mid-August, when the city plans to hold two meetings for the public to learn more about the city's traffic plans.

The anticipated restricted area is bounded roughly by St. Peter Street, Interstate 35E, Shepard Road and Chestnut Street.

The Mississippi River will remain open to boat traffic, but major St. Paul institutions such as the St. Paul Hotel — where McCain's home-state Arizona delegation is staying — and Landmark Center are located within the perimeter.

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Shepard Road itself will remain open, providing commuters an alternative should heavily used freeway off-ramps be closed.

St. Joseph's Hospital, which is within the perimeter, and United and Children's hospitals, which are just outside of it, will remain open, Bostrom said.

"They will be functioning at as high a level as they choose to," Bostrom said.

St. Paul City Engineer John Maczko said a downtown construction moratorium would be in place during the convention in order to keep traffic moving as freely as possible.

But many businesses are weighing changes to their operations.

Cossetta's Italian Market & Pizzeria on West Seventh Street, a popular lunchtime destination for hospital workers and other downtown employees, is located near the Xcel. Owner Dave Cossetta is considering setting up outdoor tents to serve pedestrians in case his customers aren't able to drive to his restaurant.

And while some customers and business owners might be inconvenienced, Cossetta said the convention is good for the city.

"It's interesting that it's here, isn't it? St. Paul, Minnesota. We're pretty good at doing some things. A lot better than people give us credit for," Cossetta said.

Lawson Software, on the border of the potential restricted area, employs 800 people in downtown St. Paul. Spokesman Joe Thornton said the company is working on contingency plans, including identifying key employees who would need to be located in the downtown offices and exploring the possibility of

telecommuting.

"We've got a number of options and plans ... but we're still waiting for (more) information," Thornton

Inside the square

St. Paul police on Wednesday released a traffic management plan for the Republican National Convention at the Xcel Energy Center Sept. 1-4. The area where traffic will be limited is bordered by St. Peter Street, Shepard Road, Chestnut Street, Interstate 35E and 10th Street.



Source: St. Paul Police Department

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said. "We will be able to manage around it with minimal disruptions."

Jake Grovum contributed to this report.

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